Differential Competence in Somali: Evidence from the Acquisition of Noun Definitization[1]

Douglas Biber[2]

This paper describes the results of an experiment designed to test the acquisition of the rule of noun definitization in Somali. It was originally assumed that the major factors involved would be cognitive, e.g., age or intellectual development, although the possibility of geographical dialects was considered. However the results indicate that none of these factors are relevant. Rather, it was found that: (1) a large percentage of the population never acquired parts of this rule at all, and (2) the major factor influencing this acquisition process is an urban vs. nomadic childhood home (which is representative of the extent of exposure to traditional oral literature).

INTRODUCTION

It is a commonly acknowledged fact that native speakers of a language differ considerably in their abilities to use that language. Comments like "X is a really good speaker," "Y is really a good story-teller," and "Z really knows how to tell good jokes," attest to this common conception that speakers of a language are not all equally fluent. In fact, observations of this type have occasionally been recorded in the linguistic literature. For example, Bloomfield (1927, p. 395) describes some of the more interesting speakers in a Menomini community which he studied. At one end of the spectrum is Red-Cloud-Woman, ". . . a woman in the sixties, [who] speaks a beautiful and highly idiomatic Menomini." At the other

---

end of the spectrum are speakers like White Thunder, ". . . a man round forty, [who] speaks less English than Menomini, and that is a strong indictment, for his Menomini is atrocious."

Are observations of this type relevant to linguistic theory? The answer given to this question by a linguist would typically be no. In fact, since Bloomfield's time, linguistics (in America) has been concerned mainly with the analysis of language(s) as an autonomous concern, i.e., language is seen to exist as an entity within itself, to be analyzed apart from the community in which it is used. This theoretical emphasis attained formal status with the distinction between competence and performance (Chomsky 1965), since linguistics was explicitly delimited to the study of a native speaker's competence. All questions of language use are put under the heading of performance, which is essentially excluded from current theory. As for differential linguistic abilities, the possibility has never been seriously considered within the framework of transformational-generative linguistics. As Hymes (1974, p. 204) points out, there is agreement concerning potential equality of all human groups, but linguists are reluctant to address the actual inequalities which are observed.

The present study deals with these issues. It describes an experiment which was designed to test the acquisition of the rule of noun definitization in Somali. An underlying assumption of the research which provides the basis for this study was that all normal speakers of Somali do, in fact, acquire this rule. The research, then, was designed merely to discover which (cognitive) factors are most influential in this acquisition process. The research, however, revealed that a large percentage of the adult subjects have not acquired this rule. The original assumption was not correct. In fact, not all Somali speakers acquire the rule of noun definitization. Assuming that all the subjects were cognitively normal, it is clear that factors other than cognitive factors are crucial to the acquisition of the rule. The results of the experiment indicate that at least some of these factors are social. Their influence will be discussed in the sections to follow.

The rule of noun definitization in Somali is claimed to be a discourse rule, i.e., the conditioning environments for its application extend beyond the domain of the sentence. To date, very little research has been directed towards the acquisition of rules of this type. Koen et al. (1969) describe an experiment designed to test the developmental progression of the ability to identify paragraph structures, Weir (1962) includes a description of the acquisition of a syntactic paragraph unit by her 2½-year-old son, and Biber (in press) describes an experiment designed to test the acquisition of the rule of noun definitization in English.

These studies support some rather unexpected claims. The first is that discourse structures are syntactically defined to a greater extent than semantic. A second claim is that the acquisition of complex discourse rules is only beginning by age five or six, and it can continue into the teens. Finally, these studies indicate that developmental factors are more influential than age in the acquisition of these rules. The present study will provide further support for each of these claims.

The outline of the paper follows. In the first section, a description of the rule of noun definitization in Somali will be given, with particular attention to the complications of this rule in relation to monologue discourse. The second section then describes an experiment designed to test the acquisition of this rule. Finally, the results of the experiment are discussed, together with some of the factors which seem to be most influential in the acquisition process.

NOUN DEFINITIZATION IN SOMALI

In common Somali, definitization is marked in the following fashion: $+\emptyset$ "undefined," $+ka/+ta$ "non-remote definite article," $+kii/+tii$ "remote definite article."[3] ka/ta alternates with ku/tu in Standard Somali, to mark the accusative and nominative cases respectively. However, this distinction does not exist in the dialects of Somali spoken in the Northeast Province of Kenya, which is the geographical area relevant to the present study. For this reason, the difference was not introduced into the experiment (described in the following section).

Both Abraham (1964) and Bell (1953) describe the distribution of these determiners. Abraham (1964, p. 263) simply notes that $-u/-a$ occurs with a present tense, while both subject and object are marked by $-ii$ with a past tense. For example, nin*ku* faras*ka* buu dilayya, "the man is beating the horse," vs. nin*kii* baa faras*kii* dilay, "the man beat the horse." Bell (1953, p. 13) gives a fuller description, although he notes that ". . . it is not possible to draw hard and fast lines between the uses of each." He claims that "$-ka$, $-ta$ are used with nouns which are close at hand or visible to the speaker . . . [while] $-kii$, $-tii$ is the general form: it is used particularly in sentences in the past tense."

These definitions agree with the general conception among speakers of Somali of the difference between the two forms. However, this is a

---

[3] *ka* and *kii* are used with nouns of the masculine gender, while *ta* and *tii* are used with feminine nouns.

description of their function in conversational dialogue, where the referent may be either physically present or not, and both past and present time are relevant. It is not possible to assume *a priori* that the determiners will have the same function in monologue discourse. This is due to the different structural characteristics of monologue and dialogue discourses (Longacre, 1976, p. 200). For instance, in narrative and procedural discourse, time is fixed as past and future (or projected) respectively. Conversely, in expository and hortatory discourse, time is not focal at all. Obviously the use of determiners can not be influenced by the factors of tense or actual physical presence in discourse of this type. Rather, one of two possibilities seem to be likely, either the determiners retain the same functions as in conversational dialogue, and are therefore restricted as to which discourse types they can occur in, or the determiners will be found to co-occur in all of these discourse types, and will therefore be distinguished by different functions in each type. It will be shown that this latter possibility is the case with respect to Somali narrative discourse.

A full discussion of the use of the determiners in monologue discourse is beyond the scope of this paper. Consideration here will be given to only narrative discourse. Even with this restriction, it will only be possible to give some of the factors influencing the use of *kii/tii* vs. *ka/ta*. These factors are illustrated from a survey of the use of determiners in the stories found in Yaaquub (1974).[4]

A first principle states simply that the first time a participant is introduced into a text, the noun takes the indefinite form, e.g., *nin* "a man." This generalization is not true of certain props which are characteristically found in a defined form. For example, one story (Yaaquub, 1974, p. 12) begins with the following sentence, nin baa suuqa ka soo gatay dameer "A man bought a donkey at the market." Here the definite form *suuqa* is used,[5] presumably because we are to understand that there is only one market where the man would go to buy something, i.e., the market nearest his home, and therefore this is "*the* market." However, the general case is that a participant is introduced into a narrative in the undefined form.

A second principle is that any subsequent references to this same participant must be defined by either *ka/ta* or *kii/tii*. Thus a narrative

---

[4] All Somali examples are given following the standard conventions of the national Somali orthography (see Andrzejewski 1974). In particular, note that *c* stands for a voiced pharyngeal fricative, and *x* for an unvoiced pharyngeal fricative.

[5] The following phonological rule applies to forms of this type:

k → ∅ / q ——.

---

would be ill-defined if it had two occurrences of *nin*, "a man," where the same man was intended by each of them.

These two principles are quite straightforward. However, the distinction between *ka/ta* and *kii/tii* is much less clear. In general, *kii/tii* is the unmarked form. Once a participant has been introduced in a text, he is subsequently referred to as *kii/tii*. There is normally no intermediate stage where *ka/ta* is used.

However, *ka/ta* is used in certain restricted syntactic constructions. One of these is the relative clause. For example, the story cited above continues to say that when the man started back home (with his donkey), two thieves came from behind him and . . . midkoodna dameer*kii* ka furtay midna gacanta iska xiray. markuu cabbaar socday ninkii dameer*ka* watay baa gadaal soo fürshay, "and one of them released the donkey (*dameerkii*) and tied his own hand. When he went a little bit, the man who was leading the donkey (*dameerka*) looked back. . ." Another story (Yaaquub, 1974, p. 19) tells how two boys who were friends had a kilogram of dates. Then one of the boys hid the dates (*timirtii*), after which . . . markaas baa kii timir*ta* qarsaday wuxuu tegey meeshii uu timir*ta* ku qarsaday, "Then the one who hid the dates (*timirta*), he went to the place where he hid the dates (*timirta*)." A final example (Yaaquub, 1974, p. 18) includes two characters who are referred to as ninkii laga gatay luul*ka* and wiilkii gatay luul*ka*, "the man from whom the pearl (*luulka*) was bought" and "the boy who bought the pearl (*luulka*)." In all of these examples, the referent is first introduced in the indefinite form. Subsequent occurrences normally take *kii/tii*. However, when the referent occurs in a relative clause, it takes *ka/ta*.

A second use of the form *ka/ta* in narrative discourse occurs in sentential complements. Consider the following examples: nin baa dibi soo kaxeystay isagoo doonaaya in uu suuqa geeyo oo gato dibiga, "A man went with an ox (*dibi*), and he was wanting that he take the ox (*dibiga*) to the market and sell it" (Yaaquub, 1974, p. 12). . . . waxaa lagu maslaxay habar*tii* iyo labadii carruurta ahayd in qofba laba boqol siiyo habar*ta* bil kasta, "what was finally decided between the mother (*habartii*) and the two children was that each person gives two-hundred shillings each month to the mother (*habarta*)" (Yaaquub, 1974, p. 19). These examples taken together with the previous ones indicate that a definite noun in any type of subordinate clause will take the *ka/ta* form.

Predicative clauses provide another conditioning environment for the use of *ka/ta*. This claim cannot be established from the above-mentioned collection of stories, but has rather been observed in locally collected narratives. For example, consider the following sentences (assuming a

narrative where *nin* "a man" has already been introduced), ninka duq buu ahaa, "the man was an old man," ninka wuu oomanaa, "the man was thirsty." In the first example, being an old man is predicated of the man, and in the second example, being thirsty (a verbal adjective) is predicated of the man. In both cases, *ninka* is preferred over *ninkii*. However, judgments on these forms are by no means unanimous, and many Somali speakers would use *kii/tii* in examples of this type. It is due to this fact that the present experiment was initiated. It was designed mainly to test this particular complication or refinement of the definitization rule. It should be noted at the outset that this is a relatively minor complication of the overall process of definitization. Therefore the acquisition of this complication should represent the final stages of a person's language acquisition, and perhaps tell us something about these stages. Regardless, it was at least hoped that some reason would be found for the considerable lack of consensus in the use of these forms, i.e., who uses *kii/tii* vs. *ka/ta*, and why?

DESIGN OF THE EXPERIMENT

An experiment was designed to test: (1) the acquisition of the rule of noun definitization in its simplest form, i.e., the distinction between undefined and defined forms, and (2) the acquisition of the complication to the definitization rule which has the conditioning environment of predicative clauses.

Two-hundred and eighty subjects (all mother-tongue speakers of Somali) were tested for the purpose of the experiment. At the time, all of them were resident in Garissa (in the N.E. Province), Kenya, although their childhood homes were from all over Kenya. Of the total, 28 were employed adults, while the rest were students. The students were taken from Garissa Primary School (standards 4–7), Young Muslim Primary School (standards 5–7), Garissa Boys Secondary School (forms 1–4), Garissa Girls Secondary School (forms 1–4), and County High School (forms 1–4).

Three separate tests were used for the experiment. These were:

1. nin
   ninka   iyo wiil baa webi adeen.
   ninkii

   nin
   ninka   duq buu ahaa.
   ninkii

                              nin
   wiilkii baa fiijiye   ninka.
                              ninkii

                 nin
   ka dib   ninka   gurigiis ayuu ku noqde.
                 ninkii

i.e., "A man and a boy went to a river. The man was an old man. The boy chased the man. Later, the man returned to his house."

2. nin
   ninka   iyo wiil baa webi adeen.
   ninkii

                              nin
   wiilkii ayaa fiijiye   ninka.
                              ninkii

   nin
   ninka   wuu oomanaa.
   ninkii

                 nin
   markaas   ninka   biyya ayuu cabe.
                 ninkii

i.e., "A man and a boy went to a river. The boy chased the man. The man was thirsty. Then the man drank some water."

3. nin
   ninka   iyo wiil baa webi adeen.
   ninkii

                              nin
   wiilkii ayaa fiijiye   ninka.
                              ninkii

                 nin
   markaas   ninka   wuu oomanaa oo wuxuu rabe biyya uu cabo.
                 ninkii

laakiinse wuxuu cabe wax uu moodaaye biyya.

nin
ninka   wuxuu cabe wuxuu ahaa subag.
ninkii

i.e., "A man and a boy went to a river. The boy chased the man. Then the man was thirsty, and he wanted to drink. But what he drank was something that he thought was water. The man, what he drank, what it was, was ghee."

The sentences used in each of these tests were not taken from any naturally occurring text. Rather, they were obtained by a consensus of three Somalis, who were given the separate texts in English, and asked to translate them into Somali. Because all three of these men spoke the dialect of Somali that is common to the Garissa area, the experiment results may have been biased. The dialectal differences involved are almost entirely lexical, e.g., *ad* vs. *tag*, "go," or *mood* vs. *u malee*, "think." However, the experiment results showed no indication of interferences caused by this factor.

The experiment was conducted as follows. Each subject was given one of the three tests and instructed to read it through as a story and select the best choice between *nin/ninka/ninkii* for each sentence. However, before the subjects actually began choosing, each story was read out loud by my Somali research assistant, Adan Suleman. The stories were read one sentence at a time, with all three choices included, e.g., "nin ama (='or') ninka ama ninkii iyo wiil baa webi adeen." The story was read aloud in this fashion in order to diminish the effect of differential reading abilities. After the subject had completed his/her choices, (s)he was asked to write his/her age, sex, school level, and where (s)he grew up before going to primary school (specifically which towns and/or in what areas with a nomadic village, and for how long in each).

For the first sentence of each of the three tests, only *nin* was counted as the correct answer. A failure to mark *nin* in the first sentence, or the marking of *nin* in any other sentence, was considered to constitute an "incorrect" answer, and indicate that the rule of noun definitization had not been acquired yet. However, the non-initial sentences could be answered with either *ninka* or *ninkii*, with no judgment of correct or incorrect being attached. Rather, the aim was to see what factors influenced the use of the different forms, and what factors influenced the acquisition of the preferred form.

RESULTS OF THE EXPERIMENT

The results of the experiment are summarized in Tables I–VII. The first two tables record the "incorrect" responses, i.e., those subjects who have not yet differentiated between the use of definite and indefinite forms in a narrative. From a comparison of these two tables, it seems that school level (which was taken to be an indicator of cognitive development) is a stronger factor than age in the acquisition of this rule. This claim is based on the fact that the school level data is less anomolous than the age data. Further support comes from the fact that these two factors overlap considerably. For example, standard seven students included in the experiment were as old as eighteen, while form one students were as young as fourteen. Thus, the two functions indicate quite different factors. Therefore, the break between standard seven and form one seems to indicate that it is at this point (and due mainly to a factor relating to cognitive development) that a person can be expected to have acquired this rule. This situation parallels the case in English (Biber, in press) where the major break in the acquisition of noun definitization coincides with the move from primary to junior high school. In both situations, the move to a different school setting, coupled with different learning demands and strategies, seems to affect the final step in the acquisition of the respective rules.[6]

Table I. "Incorrect" responses as a Function of Age[a].

Age	Total tested	%
9	4	50
10	11	45
11	12	42
12	18	44
13	23	61
14	38	29
15	36	25
16	44	11
17	26	0
18	31	3
≥19	37	0

[a] Responses which failed to distinguish between definite and indefinite forms

[6] All other results of the experiment will exclude these "incorrect" responses from the total number tested.

Table II. "Incorrect" Responses as a Function of Grade Level

Grade level	Total tested	%
4	28	55
5	41	61
6	30	37
7	22	27
I	62	5
II	52	10
III	31	6
IV	24	0

Table III. Percentage of Subjects Who Chose *Ninka* for the Respective Test Sentences of Tests 1 and 2, as a Function of Age

	Test 1:			Test 2:	
Age	Total tested	%	Age	Total tested	%
10	4	0	10	2	0
11	2	0	11	5	40
12	4	50	12	6	50
13	4	25	13	10	10
14	9	66	14	18	61
15	14	79	15	22	45
16	21	62	16	38	39
17	12	75	17	24	71
≥18	22	59	18	28	71
			19–22	23	39
			≥25	14	64

Table IV. Percentage of Subjects Who Chose *Ninka* for the Respective Test Sentences of Tests 1 and 2 as a Function of School Level

	Test 1			Test 2	
School level	Total tested	%	School level	Total tested	%
4	5	0	4	12	8
5	11	46	5	3	
6	7	57	6	12	33
7	6	83	7	21	33
I	26	81	I	41	59
II	17	59	II	37	59
III	14	50	III	20	50
IV	7	57	IV	19	42

Table V. Percentage of Subjects Who Chose *Ninkii* in the Sentence: Wiilkii Ayaa Fiijiye Nin + (?) (Test 2); as a Function of Age

10	4	75
11	5	80
12	5	60
13	11	91
14	20	90
15	23	83
16	38	87
17	24	75
18	28	93
19–22	23	74
≥25	15	80

The results concerning the acquisition of the distinction between *ka/ta* and *kii/tii* are not as straightforward. The three tests represent three successively more difficult (or more ambivalent) examples of predicative clauses. The first was designed to test the sentence nin + (?) duq buu ahaa, which is of the form NOUN BE NOUN. The second was designed to test the sentence nin + (?) wuu oomanaa, which is of the form NOUN BE VERBAL-ADJECTIVE. The results from these two tests are shown in Tables III and IV. Table III represents the percentage which chose *ninka* as a function of age, and Table IV as a function of grade level. It can be seen from both of these tables that apparently the interpretation of test 1 was easier than the interpretation of test 2. However, even with regard to test 1, it is difficult to draw many firm conclusions. It is obvious that by age 14, or standard seven, the form *ka* is preferred over *kii* in these constructions. But this preference is neither a strong one nor a consistent one. The results from test 2 are even more difficult to interpret. It is hard to say that there is a preference for either *ka* or *kii* in this construction, and again there is a lack of consistency with regard to either age or school level.

Table VI. Percentage of Subjects Who Chose *Ninka* in the Sentence: Nin + (?) Wuxuu Cabe Wuxuu Ahaa Subag (Test 3); as a Function of Age

Age	Total tested	%
14	12	16
15	13	8
16	20	25
17	16	19
18	21	10
19–22	20	10
≥25	14	50

Table VII. Percentage of Subjects Who Chose *Ninka* for the Respective Test Sentences of Tests 1, 2, and 3; as a Function of Childhood Home

Childhood home	Test 1: Total tested	%	Test 2: Total tested	%	Test 3: Total tested	%
Garissa town	18	56	33	42	14	7
Other town (non-Somali)	8	62	24	50	13	29
Other towns in Garissa District	19	68	28	61	19	26
Wajir and Mandera	9	77	27	59	10	30
Nomadic village	8	75	30	70	18	39

The fact that test 1 was answered with a majority opinion while test 2 was not may indicate one of two things. It might indicate that the interpretation of NOUN BE NOUN clauses is easier than the interpretation of adjectival predicative clauses. However, the difference is more likely due to the place in the story where the respective test sentences are found. That is, in test 2, the sentence in question (nin + (?) wuu oomanaa) is the third sentence in the story. As such, it follows the sentence, wiilkii ayaa fiijiye ninkii, where nearly all of the subjects chose *ninkii*. The problem arises from a conflict with the dialogue form of the definitization rule, which establishes a scale of mutual knowledge, *nin*, "a man," *ninka*, "the man," and *ninkii*, "the man we all know about." Therefore, in order

to choose the form, ninka wuu oomanaa, in test 2, the subject must "go in reverse" down the scale of mutual knowledge. That is, once *ninkii* is chosen in the second sentence, the choice of *ninka* in the third sentence implies a loss of mutual knowledge (in the context of dialogue discourse). Thus, it is not likely that a subject would choose *ka* in this case if he had acquired only the dialogue definitization rule. However, this problem does not arise in test 1, since the sentence in question immediately follows the sentence using the undefined form (*nin*), and so the choice of *ninka* does not imply a reversal in the scale of mutual knowledge. For this reason, test 2 is probably a more accurate indicator of which subjects have actually acquired this refinement of the narrative definitization rule, in addition to the common dialogue definitization rule.

However, are we even justified in claiming that such a refinement of the definitization rule exists? A comparison of Tables III and IV with Table V indicates that we are. Table V records the percentage of the subjects who chose *ninkii* in the sentence, wiilkii ayaa fiijiye nin + (?), of test 2. It can be seen that for the most part, the subjects had little doubt or confusion about this choice. That is, simple active sentences are apparently unmarked constructions, and as such there was a common consensus that they should take the unmarked determiner (*kii/tii*). Therefore the fact that there was a completely noncommital response in the following sentence of the same test, nin + (?) wuu oomanaa, with at least half of the subjects deliberately violating the dialogue scale of mutual knowledge and choosing *ninka*, indicates that this construction is in fact one of the conditioning environments for the use of *ka/ta*.

Assuming that this claim is true, what can be concluded from the results of these two tests? First, it seems likely that by age 14 or by standard seven, a person will have acquired this refinement of the definitization rule if he is ever going to do so. However, a second conclusion is that many people never acquire this refinement of the rule. Beyond that, the questions of who/why acquires this refinement are not answerable from the factors of age or school level.

Part of the results from test 3 have been included under Tables III and IV, i.e., the choices from sentence, nin + (?) wuu oomanaa . . . . However, this test was designed mainly for the sake of the last sentence, nin + (?) wuxuu cabe wuxuu ahaa subag. This sentence has a structure something like, (s The thing (s The man drank the thing) was ghee), and is interpreted by at least some speakers as a predicative structure. However, as can be seen from Table VI, the percentage who chose *ninka* here was very small (50% for the oldest group, less than 25% for all other ages). Perhaps the fact that any chose the marked form *ninka* for the last

sentence in this sequence is significant. But at this point, no claims can be made about the reality of this conditioning environment, or its acquisition.

The final factor to be considered in relation to these tests is that of childhood home.[7] It turns out that this factor is considerably more significant than either age or school level. The results of tests 1, 2, and 3 as a function of this factor are found in Fig. 1 (and Table VII). The
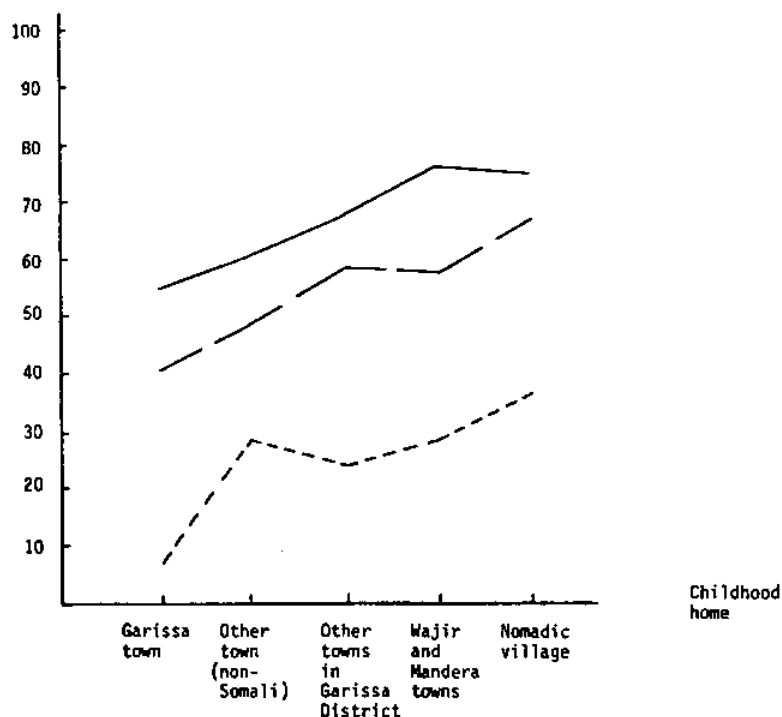
Percentage of subjects
choosing ninka

Fig. 1. Results of tests 1–3 as a function of childhood home. The solid line represents those subjects who chose ninka in the sentence: nin + (?) duq buu ahaa (test); the dashed line represents those subjects who chose ninka in the sentence: nin + (?) wuu oomanaa (test 2); and the dotted line represents those subjects who chose ninka in the sentence: nin + (?) wuxuu cabe wuxuu ahaa subag (test 3).

[7]The interpretation of the results was also considered as a function of sex, but there was no significant correlation.

"childhood home" is defined as the location where the subject spent the majority of his time before going to primary school. This information was collected from each subject who was either in secondary school or was a working adult. The answers were divided into the following geographical locations: Garissa town, any town found within a non-Somali area of Kenya, any other minor towns in Garissa District, Wajir and Mandera towns (both are district headquarters within the N.E. Province of Kenya), and nomadic villages outside of any town (although normally within the bounds of Garissa District).

The data presented in Table VII (Fig. 1) is obviously much less anomolous than the data presented in the other tables. This can be shown empirically by comparing the strength of the factors of age, grade level, and childhood home as predictors of kalta usage. Table VIII gives the r^2 computations based on Pearson r correlations of the data presented in Tables III, IV, VI, and VII. The r^2 computation indicates here the percentage of the variance in kalta usage (for those subjects who use kalta in these constructions) which can be accounted for by knowing the predictor, i.e., either age, grade level, or childhood home. For example the variable of age can predict 52% of the variance in kalta usage on tes. 1, grade level can predict 23% of the variance on test 1, and childhood home can predict 91% of the variance on test 1. As can be seen, childhood home is a quite strong predictor of kalta usage on these three tests, while the variables of age and grade level are considerably less strong and less consistent.

For all three tests, the variable of childhood home indicates the same consistent trend. That is, subjects from Garissa town show the least tendency to use the kalta forms in these constructions, while those from the nomadic villages show the greatest tendency (viz. 56% vs. 75% on test one, and 42% vs. 70% on test 2). Those from the other three locations are spaced rather evenly in between, although they all show a consistently

Table VIII. Pearson r Coefficients Squared, Representing the Strength of the Linear Relationship Between kalta Usage and the Predictors Age, Grade Level, and Childhood Home

	Age	Grade level	Childhood home
Test 1	.52	.23	.91
Test 2	.28	.56	.92
Test 3	.23		.76

greater tendency towards *ka/ta* forms than do the subjects raised in Garissa town.

As far as test 1 is concerned, subjects from all locations showed at least a greater than 50% preference for *ninka*. But this preference is much more pronounced in those subjects coming from nomadic villages (or from Wajir and Mandera).

The same trend is shown with respect to tests 2 and 3, but it is more pronounced. The results from test 2 show Garissa town subjects to have only a 42% tendency to use *ninka* in predicative constructions, while subjects from nomadic villages had a 70% preference for these forms. Again, subjects from the other locations were ranged in between these two extremes, although both Wajir, Mandera, and the other towns within Garissa District showed a definite preference for *ninka*. Finally, on test 3, only 7% of the subjects from Garissa town chose *ninka*, compared to 39% of those from nomadic villages. Again, the other locations range in between these two, with all three of them grouped between 25–30%. This test shows the greatest separation between Garissa town speakers and the other locations.

It might be thought that this trend is merely representative of dialectal differences. In fact, the Somali spoken in Wajir and Mandera does show several differences in vocabulary and morphology from that spoken in Garissa. Again, many of the Somalis who live in the non-Somali areas of Kenya and Tanzania originally came from Northern Somalia, and therefore speak that dialect. However, Somalis from the other three areas, viz. Garissa town, other towns in Garissa District, and nomadic villages within Garissa District, all speak essentially the same dialect. Thus, the two extremes of the spectrum resulting from this experiment (viz. Garissa town and nomadic villages) are speakers of the same dialect, while the intermediate percentages do in fact represent different dialects. That is, there is no obvious relationship between known dialectal divisions and the use of *ka/ta* in these constructions. Therefore, the major factor operating here does not seem to be linguistic in nature at all. Rather, it is claimed to be social.

If this is so, what, then, are the crucial social differences between these locations? Garissa town is unique among them in that it exists as the major meeting ground between the Somali and Bantu cultures. It is both a district and a provincial headquarters, while immediately across the river begins the native homelands of certain Bantu tribes. A high percentage of Garissa-born Somalis are bilingual in Swahili, and it is difficult to find one

who does not mix at least some Swahili words into his speech. However, the social influence of this tribal mixing seems to be at least as relevant as the linguistic influence. That is, a very large proportion of the population of Garissa is non-Somali, and therefore the joint culture of the town is not Somali. It is rather in some sense "Kenyan." That is, people spend time on activities which Somalis would not normally bother with and, more noticeably, people do not bother with certain activities which Somalis would be expected to. For an example, I have asked several young men about their geneologies. A good half of those who were raised in Garissa town could not trace back beyond their great-grandfather. In other words, no one had ever bothered to educate them in even the most basic aspects of their heritage. Conversely, I have never met a nomadic Somali who could not recite back at least to his clan leader. Similarly, there are very few practicing poets found in Garissa town, and it is unusual for town mothers or fathers to tell their children stories. For reasons such as this last one, it is likely that a Garissa-raised child would receive little exposure to well-formed narrative discourses. Therefore, he would never have the opportunity to learn the minor complications of discourse rules (such as the definitization rule).

Life in the nomadic villages would represent the opposite situation. That is, there would likely be a full exposure to several types of traditional literature, as part of the training which every mother (and/or father) gives her children. Therefore, these children would have a much greater chance of learning the minor complications of discourse rules. In fact, there may be some entire discourse rules which for this reason are learned mainly by the nomadic peoples rather than the town peoples. That is, the skill of putting together a well-formed narrative is an acquired skill; and not one which comes naturally with age. But unless a child receives considerable exposure to well-formed narratives, he will not acquire the discourse rules needed to later form the narratives himself.

The results from Wajir and Mandera, as well as the other towns in Garissa District, can be explained by this same interpretation. That is, these locations show much less mixing of cultures and language than does Garissa, and therefore it is to be expected that traditional literary practices will be more in evidence. However, it is not as obvious that the subjects who grew up in non-Somali areas of Kenya and Tanzania should have had a similar culture exposure. Yet the fact that these peoples are an extreme minority where they are living is likely to cause them to be more careful in preserving their culture. Thus, it is not surprising that these three groups

of towns should show similar results. All of them are affected by the negative influences of town life, but conversely in all of them, it seems that at least some time is reserved for traditional story-telling, etc.

CONCLUSION

At this point, the evidence seems to indicate that predicative clauses are in fact one of the conditioning environments for using the marked form of the determiner *ka/ta*. It has been claimed that a majority of Garissa-raised speakers have not acquired this refinement of the definitization rule, while a strong majority of nomadic-raised speakers have. It is further claimed that the failure to acquire this refinement is due mainly to a lack of exposure to well-formed narrative discourses. It should be noted that this is in some ways a developmental factor, and that it is certainly not conditioned merely by age. Rather, it seems that if a speaker has learned a sufficient number of narratives as a result of his own traditional training, then at the same time he will have had ample opportunity to acquire the relevant discourse patterns. However, even among the nomadic-raised speakers, 25–30% did not acquire this refinement of the definitization rule. Therefore, there may be even additional factors which are related to the acquisition of discourse rules. Regardless, the claim that developmental factors are at least as important as age is further supported by this study.

The claim that a considerable percentage of a given population might never acquire some of the more difficult discourse rules is not as suspect as is might seem at first. It does not represent a return to "prescriptive" linguistics. We have been conditioned by the transformational-generative paradigm to focus on a native-speaker's judgments concerning what is "grammatical" in his/her language. This discovery procedure is often understood to imply that each native speaker has a full competence of his/her mother tongue, and therefore will always be able to make valid judgments concerning the grammaticality of any given construction. If a potential speaker of a given language never receives adequate exposure to a given construction, however, he will never gain competence in that portion of the grammar. Thus, not all native speakers are equally qualified to give judgments concerning grammaticality; rather, it is possible for mature adults to lack "competence" in certain portions of the grammar of

their own mother-tongue, simply through lack of adequate exposure to those portions of the grammar (Hymes, 1974, pp. 72, 205).[8]

This claim is supported by the present study. The fact that 50% of the subjects chose the marked form *ka/ta* in the environment of predicative clauses indicates the existence of a rule to that effect. The fact that approximately 70% of the subjects who were raised in nomadic villages chose this marked form provides even stronger support of the reality of this conditioning environment. Therefore, the fact that only approximately 40% of the Garissa town subjects chose this form indicates that a large percentage of a population can fail to acquire a rule. Furthermore, the fact that 30% of the nomadic subjects failed to acquire this rule may indicate that adequate exposure is not sufficient within itself, that there may be additional developmental factors.

In fact, similar observations have been made with respect to the acquisition of noun definitization in English. For example, Maratsos (1976) studies the use of definitization by young children. In particular, he focuses on cases where the indefinite article has a specific but non-unique reference, e.g., I have a hammer in my bag. He notes that this use of the

---

[8] It has been pointed out to me by B. Comrie that this description is too simplistic. That is, there *is* a sense in which every native speaker of a language has full competence in his language, if competence is considered individually. In other words, every speaker is fully competent in his *own* language (= idiolect). However, this use of the term "competence" must be distinguished from communal competence where a community collectively defines the domain of a grammar. Given this latter definition of competence, it makes sense to talk about native speakers who have not acquired full competence in their mother-tongue.

It is further necessary to distinguish between value judgments made by one community concerning the linguistic competence of another community, and value judgments within a single community. The former case is common between linguistic communities which speak different dialects of the same language. For example, Somalis from Northern Somalia often say that Southern Somalis speak "bad" Somali. But this value judgment merely indicates that the standard for the Southern Somalis is different from that of the Northern Somalis. It should not be confused with the case in which a standard is accepted by a majority of Southern speakers, although it is not fully acquired by a significant minority of these same speakers. It is only in cases of the latter type that we can speak of a lack of competence.

Finally it is necessary to distinguish between a "failure to acquire" and a simple historical change. I would claim that these two are not mutually exclusive. Rather, it can be the case that a generation has collectively defined a certain standard for their language, and succeeding generations fail to acquire certain portions of this standard, resulting in linguistic change. In fact, this seems to be the case with respect to Garissa urban Somali.

indefinite article is the most difficult to acquire, since the speaker must learn to judge the specificity of referents non-egocentrically, taking the listener's point of view into account as well as his/her own. That is, in these situations the speaker has some specific referent in mind, which is therefore unique for him. Since the listener is not yet aware of the referent, the speaker must defer to the listener's lack of knowledge and use the indefinite form.

The interesting fact in relation to the present study is that Maratsos (1976, pp. 102–105) not only claims that this use of the indefinite article is acquired later than other uses, but he further suggests that at least some native speakers of English never fully acquire this use. That is, he explicitly tested the non-egocentricity of adults relative to children. In the experiment, the subjects were physically separated from the "listener" (so that the "listener" could not see the physical context of the speaker). The speaker was given several toy animals and a toy car before being separated from the listener. Then the speaker was told to place one of the animals in the car, after which (s)he was asked, "Who got into the car?" The answer would be specific but non-unique from the listener's point of view, but (situationally) unique for the speaker. Thus, the answer given would indicate whether the speaker was considering only his/her point of view, or the listener's point of view as well. The results were quite surprising, "Ten of the seventeen children who participated referred incorrectly, with a definite expression. But so did seven of the thirteen adults who were tested. There was really no difference between the groups" (Maratsos, 1967, p. 103). The question of why some adults and not others "correctly" used the indefinite article in these cases is not addressed by Maratsos, except for a description of the situation, ". . . perhaps competence, at least as measured by actual performance of the above kind, never reaches a perfect state" (Maratsos, 1976, p. 105). Thus, although the causative factors may be different, the conclusion reached by Maratsos is essentially identical to the one arrived at in this paper.

Finally, it might be noted that the merging of *kii/tii* and *ka/ta* is an example of simplification, and this simplification might be invoked as an adequate explanation of the change. But this overlooks the fact that the change is not taking place in all dialects. The merger in progress in Garissa town is socially motivated and may in time affect nomadic speech. The structural simplification would be equally applicable to both dialects, but the social motivation present in the urban dialect is lacking among the nomads.

It is interesting to note that the Somali spoken in Garissa District (both urban and nomadic) is in general quite innovative, and that the historical change has often been in the direction of simplification. Thus, for example, as has been mentioned, the definite forms *ku/tu* have been eliminated from Garissa Somali. Further simplifications include the merger of word-final *d* and *r* to *r*, the merger of vowel-glide sequences with geminate vowel sequences, and the regularization of the "strong" verb paradigm. The present study has provided a social motivation for at least one of these historical changes, and it is likely that these other developments have similar motivations. Additional research is required (especially along the dimensions of real and/or apparent time) in order to more fully understand the interaction between historical process and social factors.

REFERENCES

Abraham, R. C. *Somali-English dictionary*. London: University of London Press, 1964.

Andrzejewski, B. W. The introduction of a national orthography for Somali. *African Language Studies*, 1974, *15*, 199–203.

Bell, C. R. V. *The Somali language*. London: Longmans, 1953.

Biber, D. The acquisition of discourse rules: Implications for reading and language acquisition theory. (in press).

Bloomfield, L. Literate and illiterate speech. *American Speech*, 1927, *2*, 423–439; In D. Hymes (Ed.), *Language in culture and society* (Reprint). New York: Harper and Row, 1964, pp. 391–396.

Chomsky, N. *Aspects of the theory of syntax*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1965.

Hymes, D. *Foundations in sociolinguistics: An ethnographic approach*. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1974.

Koen, F., Becker, A., & Young, R.E., The psychological reality of the paragraph. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, 1969, 49–53.

Longacre, R. E. *An anatomy of speech notions*. Lisse: The Peter de Ridder Press, 1976.

Maratsos, M. P. *The use of definite and indefinite reference in young children*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1976.

Weir, R. H. *Language in the crib*. The Hague: Mouton, 1962.

Yaaquub, X. *Waari mayside war ha kaaharo*. Xamar: Wakaaladda Madbacadda Qaranka, 1974.